



Smith Mountain Lake 2007



Smith Mountain Lake is a 20,600-acre impoundment located near Roanoke Virginia. This reservoir is one of Virginia's premier fisheries, offering a variety of fishing and other recreational opportunities. The reservoir is owned by American Electric Power Company and is managed primarily for hydroelectric power generation. Most of the shoreline is developed with residential homes but other facilities catering to outdoor enthusiasts are found at various locations.

Black bass (largemouth and smallmouth bass) are the most sought after species by anglers at Smith Mountain Lake. Largemouth bass comprise approximately 85% of the black bass fishery. Largemouth bass fishing on this 20,600-acre lake is good but this fishery receives a lot of pressure. Extensive electrofishing surveys (conducted by VDGIF fisheries biologists) each spring typically produce many largemouth bass in the 2-4 pound range. Surveys indicate the largemouth bass and smallmouth bass fishery had been declining for several years but has increased the last three years, matching historically high numbers from the mid 1990's. The highest densities of largemouth bass in this reservoir are found upstream (heading away from the dam) of Hales Ford Bridge area in the Roanoke River arm and buoy B26 in the Blackwater River arm. Smallmouth bass are more evenly distributed throughout the reservoir. Piers and boathouses provide extensive shoreline cover that anglers should take advantage of. Fishing around and under boat docks/piers from the water is legal but remember to be courteous to dock owners. Additionally, natural structure such as fallen trees, rock shoals, and points, are seasonally productive. Coves typically produce the best largemouth bass angling opportunities during the winter and spring months due to shallower water and less boating traffic. However, these fish tend to move into deeper water during the warmer months. To avoid the heavy boat traffic in the summer, anglers should concentrate their efforts at night or very early in the morning.

Smith Mountain Lake has gained national attention for its striped bass fishery. The chance to catch fish in the 40-pound class and routine catches of striped bass in the 10–15 pound class had made this fishery very unique. Consequently, striped bass became nearly as popular at Smith Mountain Lake as black bass. Striped bass have been stocked into this reservoir since impoundment in 1963. Limited spawning habitat for striped bass prevents natural reproduction. Stocking is required to maintain the fishery unlike other species such as bass, crappie, catfish, and shad.

The number of striped bass in the population had been improving since 1999 as a result of increased stockings and better survival of young fish. However, the Smith Mountain Lake striped bass fishery experienced a major setback in 2003. A parasitic copepod (*Achtheres*) infestation of striped bass began in the fall of 2002 and the shad population was reduced by more than 60% for several months due to a shad winterkill in

2003. As a result, a major striped bass kill occurred in the spring of 2003 for a minimum of two months. Based on observations during the fish kill, gill net data, VDGIF citation program data, and angler diary data; the fish kill eliminated most of the striped bass over 10 pounds. Gill net data has indicated that the number of young (up to 3 years of age) striped bass remained good despite the fish kills. The number of bigger striped bass has been improving but most of the larger fish are still limited to 10-15 pounds. However, there are a few striped bass available up to 20 pounds with the biggest fish in 2006 weighed in at 38 pounds! VDGIF is continuing to monitor and research the parasite infestation. It is unknown at this time what the long-term impacts of this parasite will have on the health of the striped bass population at Smith Mountain Lake.

In an attempt to expedite the rebuilding of this trophy fishery, new striped bass regulations were instituted in 2006. The new striped bass size limits are designed to restrict the harvest of larger striped bass when survival of catch and release is high and allow harvest of these fish during the summer when survival is typically low. Studies have consistently shown that catch and release of striped bass in the summer months results in very high mortality. Most of these striped bass die 1-3 days after release and most sink to the bottom and never surface. Consequently, anglers should not release striped bass during the summer months. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries encourage striped bass anglers to quit fishing after catching their 2-fish limit in the months of June-September. Catch-and-release is recommended for striped bass from October through May. The new striped bass regulations maintain the two fish creel limit throughout the year but require all striped bass between 26 to 36 inches be released from October 1 through May 31. There are no size limits from June-September.

Striped bass are distributed throughout the lake during most of the year but are concentrated in lower lake areas during the summer and early fall months. Coves are typically not very productive for striped bass during the summer and early fall months so anglers should concentrate their efforts on the main lake when water temperatures begin to rise. Striped bass anglers utilize a variety of fishing methods such as drifting or slow trolling live shad, trolling plugs and bucktail jigs, or casting top water lures and bucktail jigs. Anglers use live shad throughout the year, trolling is most popular during the warmer months, and casting top water or shallow running plugs is most productive during the spring at night. Most striped bass are caught between the dam and buoy 64 of the Roanoke Arm and up to buoy 40 of the Blackwater Arm. Although these are the general areas most striped bass are caught, these fish are very mobile and may change locations continuously depending on forage availability, water temperatures, and spawning.

A striped bass tagging study was initiated in the fall of 2001 to provide biologists with information on striped bass catch rates, harvest rates, movement, survival, and population dynamics. The fish tags are yellow and approximately three inches in length. The tags are attached to the abdominal area of the fish and should be easily recognized without dissection. Tagged fish do not have to be harvested to collect the reward. Cut or clip tags (do not pull tags loose) from fish you wish to release. Anglers are encouraged to submit all tags collected from striped bass to the address printed on the tag with the following information: date fish was caught, marker number nearest to location of

capture, length of fish, and was the fish harvested or released. Tag rewards are assigned to specific tags and not to any particular fish size. All returned tags will be worth one of the following amounts: \$5, \$10, \$20, \$35, or \$50.

VDGIF typically does not collect the older and larger (over 8 lbs) striped bass but data on these fish are very important for monitoring the fishery and new regulations. Any willing angler is asked to keep striped bass heads of fish approximately 8 pounds or larger if they choose to harvest the fish. These heads can be frozen and delivered to the “Virginia Outdoorsman” sporting goods store located in Moneta where VDGIF will pick up the samples. Be sure to fill out and include a form detailing the size of each fish and when it was caught upon drop off, the form is available at the store. If you would like to know the age and year the fish was stocked, include your mailing address and you will be sent the information after the fish has been aged. Most fish have an inner ear bone in the head (termed “otolith”), from which the age is determined. Each otolith contains rings similar to tree rings and can be counted for an accurate age determination.

This reservoir has limited crappie habitat. Although the lake produces many quality size crappie, anglers should not expect to consistently catch large numbers of crappie. The crappie population is smaller than some other Virginia reservoirs but the quality of these fish is very good. Coves and the upper ends of the reservoir should be the most productive, especially near fallen trees or brush piles. Crappie anglers are the most productive in March-May and October-November.

Sunfish and catfish are also popular sport species at Smith Mountain Lake. Sunfish are abundant but competition with shad prevents good growth so most of these fish are small. Channel catfish, flathead catfish, and white catfish make up the catfish fishery. Flathead and channel catfish are most abundant in the upper reaches of the Roanoke Arm and white catfish are found primarily in the lower end of the reservoir where the water clarity is much better. Smith Mountain Lake receives a light stocking of musky fingerlings, annually. Although walleye stocking has been discontinued, an occasional walleye can be caught along the shoreline of the lower lake (below R-8) during night hours of spring and fall. There is a very limited amount of natural reproduction of walleye occurring in the reservoir.

Numerous public and private boat ramps and marinas are found around the lake. In addition, there is a very nice handicapped-accessible fishing pier at the Smith Mountain Lake State Park boat launching area and a new fishing pier is under construction in the new Franklin County Park located across the lake for the Smith Mountain Lake State Park. Additional information on lodging, marinas, and other attractions can be obtained by calling the Smith Mountain Lake Visitors Center at 1-800-676-8203. Additional Information concerning the fishery can be obtained by calling VDGIF at 434-525-7522.